

Strange Birds

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/24592726) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/24592726>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Original Work
Additional Tags:	Diary/Journal
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Short Fictions
Stats:	Published: 2020-06-07 Completed: 2022-11-23 Words: 8,559 Chapters: 14/14

Strange Birds

by [ylzzirf](#)

Summary

Living, learning, forgetting, and remembering.

June 14, 2013

Tonight was the last night of Oongo. Oongo is the only big music festival within three hundred miles of us, and it's on a soy farm, but it's been massive for the past few years, so I begged Delia to come with me. I didn't have to beg very hard, but we had to scrounge up \$500 to pay for the privilege of standing in mud (and, perhaps, pee) for seven hours.

Tonight, we went to see the headliner, a guy who is already a has-been. Our real purpose for standing at the Big Stage was to get closer to the Large Stage. Delia's favorite band, Smidgen, was playing there. Or DJing there. DJing at 1:30 in the morning, which meant that we'd probably have pretty good luck at getting close to the stage.

"Listen," she told me. "It's time to head over to the Large Stage."

I interrupted her. "Do you think they named these stages to be deliberately confusing? That way, they can force you to spend more time walking through the middle, past all the vendors? So that you'll have to spend more—"

"Of course. I personally hate that there's one called the Small Stage. Embarrassing. Imagine getting called to play Oongo, and they tell you, 'Yeah, we need you on the Small Stage at 3:45 on Thursday afternoon.'"

Before I could take up for any of the rising artists, because I'd actually seen a good synth-wave show at 4:00 on Friday, she pulled me to the far side of the crowd.

"Here. We can take this shortcut."

The shortcut looked a little bit like a drainage ditch. Because it was a drainage ditch. And I'd shudder to think about all the sewage in it, except for the fact that I'd probably already stepped on three turds in the past half-hour. (From humans or horses, I honestly don't know.)

Which was marginally better than the needles my mother thought I would step on.

So, anyhow, we slid through the ditch. It wasn't so bad, because when I got to the other side of the Big Muddy River, we were already in the other field.

"This is where Smidgen is playing?"

"Seems kind of empty, but I think so," I said. "Let's see if we can get closer."

But we didn't get within two-hundred feet of the stage before hitting the human blockade. A passel of people with glow-in-the-dark hula-hoops formed a parade in front of us. Hula-hooping at two in the morning. Exercising at two in the morning.

I rather liked standing there at two in the morning, but the thought of moving vigorously in circles after drinking vodka coolers made me feel dizzy. I almost sat on the ground right then and there, but I remembered our ultimate goal.

“Do you think we can just push through their conga line?”

“No,” Delia said. She sighed. “It’s sort of, like, sad house music. So it sounds better coming from a distance, anyway.”

We stood there, listening to the echo of the sad-house-music-that-sounds-better-from-a-distance. It sounded quite lovely, actually, once the breeze picked up. I almost made a joke about how we were only catching a smidge of Smidgen, but ... it was too soothing to joke about.

The music wafted over to us, and the air cooled down, and it was a bit like sitting in a dark bedroom with a guy you like a lot. Saying nothing, but listening to sad music through some tinny earbuds.

“This would be kind of romantic,” I said. “If we were here with a date.”

She nudged me. “They would agree with you.”

And, of course, twenty feet away, there was a couple. Couple-ulating.

We left the show right around then because we needed to rehydrate. And because we’d seen enough genitalia to hold us over for awhile. And then we stayed up until four in the morning, just talking about what we’d enjoyed most about the festival. And about life back home, and about how lucky we were to get to spend a weekend away from home.

And, somewhere around seven in the morning, I fell asleep.

February 23, 2010

I remember reading in a music magazine at the end of last year that we'd reached the end of an era. An era of what, exactly, I don't know. An era of The Strokes and those newspaper-wielding-street-urchin hats, I guess.

Tonight, I watched some of the Olympics. I like summer sports more than winter sports, but I usually watch the skaters.

I've only been ice skating twice. The first time, I went with an older cousin. About thirty seconds after I went out on the ice, they made the announcement that the Zamboni was coming out.

And I was on the far end of the rink, away from the little door. It took me three minutes to pick my way back to the far side. Everyone else had made it off the ice and an entire crowd assembled around the edge of the rink. They were all gawking at me.

I waddled over to my cousin. "Hey. Why didn't you come over to the side and pull me over the rail?"

"Pull you over the rail? Christ," he said. "You're eleven years old. Learn to figure out things for yourself. You should've skated backwards, back to the door."

"I don't know how to skate backwards! You're not strong enough, is what it is," I said. "You couldn't have picked me up."

"I'll prove it, I can."

We went back two days later. He managed to hoist me over the barrier — and I cut his arm with one of the blades.

We never went back.

Stuff like that makes me a little embarrassed. I'm a wild person. I'm an awkward person. But I'm not a bad person.

I don't know if I'm a talented person, though. These skaters have trained since they were kids, but I haven't ever really trained for anything. I'm average in so many ways, except for maybe appearance.

And I don't mean that I'm above average. Anyway ...

I guess I wish I'd learned to dance or something. Or to play an instrument. As you can see from the skating incident, I'm very coordinated and I have great motor skills.

Hmmm. What else is going on? Nothing too unusual has happened lately. Except at work.

I work nights at ... a place. It's not nefarious or anything; it's just a boring retail job. Anyway, a woman came in a couple of days ago and tried to buy thirty-five dollars worth of stuff. Mostly candy, actually.

But she only had fifteen dollars. And when I told her she still owed us twenty, she lost it, but momentarily regained her ... not-so-cool cool.

"You know what? I'll get you twenty. Just give me and my mouth ten minutes in the parking lot, and I'll be back with it."

And that's exactly what she did.

"She brought me the money, so I rang her up," I told one of my coworkers.

"Damn. I don't want to think about how she pulled that off," he said.

"Well, maybe she offered to do an errand for someone, or helped someone ... with their homework?"

It was the only thing I could think of, but he seemed unpersuaded.

"She said she was using her mouth, though."

"Well," I said. "Maybe it was homework for a speech class?"

"Sure it was," he said. "Just ... go wash your hands, just to be on the safe side."

This is the sort of stuff that happens to me.

I wonder if something important will happen over the next few years ... I wonder what I'll look back on, and what I'll tell younger people about my life.

Or what I'll tell older people. Or any people. I feel like, someday, if I have the opportunity to reminisce over things ... well, I'll want to do it properly.

You hear people talk about living through a chapter in history, sometimes, and I wonder what sort of chapter will be written between now and 2015. And 2020.

That's so far away. It's strange to even think about it.

But I'd rather think about that than about my pre-calculus homework. Homework that's due tomorrow. Homework that I'd better work on now.

Hmmm. Maybe someone would do it for me, for twenty dollars ...

September 10, 2015

There's an eclipse coming later this month.

When I was younger, I liked to watch the stars at night. ... Of course I liked to watch the stars at night, because what other time would I watch them? But enough about that.

I would look for constellations, but for some reason, I could only manage to find the Big Dipper.

Now, when I look at the sky at night, I think about other people looking up at it. Maybe absurdly, I think about people on the other side of the world. People standing under the daytime sky.

There are so many bad things happening out there — always another crisis — so I like to think about happier things happening. Births, weddings, good food, good music. Great music. Great food.

And when I can't think about happier things actually happening, I think about things I've seen in movies. Bollywood movies, and Wong Kar Wai movies, and slice-of-life stories.

Mmmmm. Especially films with cooking scenes. Any good movie is made immeasurably better when there's a cooking scene — or an eating scene.

I watched this international movie on the classic movie channel. It was on pretty late at night — normally, they show the sexier movies at two in the morning. This one wasn't really sexy, so much as ... different. "Arty" is a better descriptor.

There was a scene where they fed each other food, and it looked so good that I had to go out later in the week and try one of the chicken-based dishes the happy couple shared.

I found a restaurant with an online menu that listed the same dish — and it was in the next town over. Twenty minutes separated me from the object of my desire.

I sat down, ordered, and within a few minutes, I was tucking in. When I was about halfway through my plate, I heard a man scream.

I looked up. Two men ran out of the kitchen. They ran right past me. The one in front had a cutting board, which he was using as a shield. The one in the back had a knife. A very large knife.

And he chased the other guy around the tables at the front of the restaurant, and then looped back around to the back of the room. Several people got up and hurried out, but I stayed where I was. Finally — probably ten seconds later — a waitress grabbed my shoulder and forced me to stand, and we hurried out together.

"Is he going to stab him?" I asked.

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t know why I asked you that. It’s a bad question. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” she said. “This isn’t your fault. Or my fault. I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

We stood there for a bit, together, both nodding. But then it seemed like I should leave. So I did. All of the customers left, getting into their cars, but the employees didn’t. They stood there, helplessly.

As I drove off, I turned back around and looked at them. I felt sad. I didn’t know what would happen for them, but I realized how lucky I was. I escaped unscathed. I didn’t even have to pay for the food, so, in hindsight, that was actually the best day to have dined with them.

One of my biggest regrets is that I didn’t think to bring the plate outside with me — another man did that, and I was immensely jealous of him. Which makes me feel a little selfish, even though I’m not the one who took the plate.

I wonder what he did with the plate. Did he take it back? It was a pretty nice plate.

It took me about an hour, but I decided that, even though the chicken was delicious, I wouldn’t be going back. Their cook seemed to have more interest in chopping people than chopping food.

In the meantime, I’ve found other restaurants that I like better. The Chinese restaurant in our town, for instance, is my favorite restaurant in the world. The mei fun is especially nice.

Good grief, I’m so hungry right now. I’d better make dinner.

Oh, who am I kidding? I’m going to go to the Chinese buffet.

October 31, 2012

Earlier this week, my friends took me to see the Rocky Horror Picture Show. The theater wouldn't let us bring toast, but we got to bring everything else.

I'm still picking rice out of my hair.

I don't really have big plans for tonight. I was going to dress up in a Twin Peaks-themed outfit. I have a chevron-patterned skirt, so I decided to be a Sexy Red Room.

But I don't know anyone who's actually having a party-party tonight, so I'll probably just put on my outfit, take a bunch of pictures, post the best one, and then change into pajamas.

Well, I'll probably change into pajamas before the posting. But that's the plan.

I wonder how many other people are doing that — putting on a costume for five minutes and then ripping it off after making a post about it. Probably lots of us.

With any luck, I'll be in my pajamas by 9:00.

... And I'm back, two hours later. It's 9:50. I've been outside for the past half-hour, because someone burned a car in my neighbor's front yard.

The whole neighborhood gathered to watch. One of my neighbors and her husband walked past me, gossiping about who the neighbor was, and what kind of stuff he got up to.

"That's quite the trick," the woman said.

"Well, no one ever said that he turns treats," the man snickered.

And they both walked off, laughing. They're in their fifties, though, so I'm inclined to write off their humor as the product of having a sense of humor that's been dulled by settling into middle age.

I went back inside, naturally, because I didn't see anything and I didn't know anything. But I imagine the whole neighborhood will have it sorted out by the time I wake up tomorrow.

This isn't the first time this has happened — it just happened to a different person, back then.

It was about a year ago, when one of the neighbors cheated on his wife. She set his truck on fire. I remember the big scramble that happened that night.

Within a few weeks, they'd moved out of their house. Another family bought it. You hardly ever see them, except for when they get in the pool in their backyard.

(The new family's mother looked like the last dad's girlfriend, but that's speculation on my part. Very thoroughly-considered speculation, though.)

It's a little late in the season for swimming. Even though the days are all warm and sunny, the leaves are falling off of the trees. It's very ... pumpkin-spicy outside.

It's nearly midnight, now, so I'd better go to sleep — before I burn out. (Har, har.)

March 28, 2016

Last night, George and I went out to eat. We were out late because we had to meet up after he left work. By the time we got there, the restaurant wasn't full, but it was surprisingly busy.

The table next to us at Sunny's, our local knockoff version of Steak'n'Shake, was engaged in a scintillating conversation:

"This summer, I've gotta learn how to mow that diamond pattern into the yard. Gonna start doing a different diagonal pattern, to make the yard look more ..."

George reached over and squeezed my hand. "There's nothing romantic about living right outside of one of the most boring cities in the whole expanse of the southern U.S."

"We live outside of Nashville and you really think that there's nothing excit—"

"Nope."

"Damn," I said. "Be bitter about it."

But I was also bitter about it, of course. There's not a lot going on anymore, especially as some of our (supposedly) twenty-something friends are settling into middle-middle age.

"Did I tell you Delia is having a baby?"

"Jeez. Y'all are only twenty-three. I—"

"Twenty-two," I said. "Twenty-two. You're twenty-three. I think that we're still really young, but it seems like half of the people in our class have either gotten married or had kids."

George said nothing.

"I couldn't find anyone to have kids with, even if I wanted to have 'em."

He sipped his coffee. "You're one of these people who — you're very alluring, in an ... an eccentric way. And don't get mad."

"I'm not mad," I said. "I agree with you."

"... but you're not girlfriend material."

"I know," I said. "If I'd been a man, I would be—"

"Drowning in it. Yeah."

"Well, that's not how I would have said it, but ..." I paused. I had to seriously evaluate myself before I could say what I wanted to say.

“I think that I have qualities that would make me a desirable boyfriend. Hard-working, responsible, serious-but-good-humored. And kind of a strong jaw, too, I think. I think I’m sort of handsome, even, but I’m not gorgeous. I would be a good boyfriend, but ... I don’t really want to be somebody’s wife.”

“And I don’t want you to be, either. I like coming here and hanging out with you.”

George and I would always be friends, I hoped. In that very moment, I hoped that I’d never lose him. Even though he dates girls and guys, I knew he and I weren’t (and aren’t) a good romantic match. But we’re perfect friends.

And whoever he ends up with, I hope they won’t take him far away from me. He’s too much of a ... He’s a wall for me. I can bounce ideas off of him, day in and day out. And he’s so solid.

I resumed our conversation. “Do you feel upset when you think about how many people our age are getting married?”

“A little bit. I don’t want to get married, either, but—”

“You wonder why all these other people are doing it. Like, what do they have that we don’t?”

“Yeah. Except I already know the answers to that — lots of money, susceptibility to peer pressure, family connections, and lower standards.”

“George! Is that really fair?”

“Fair? It doesn’t matter if it’s fair — it’s just the truth.”

“For some people. But I think some people can make it work. Plenty of folks are trying to make it work.”

We started to eat our burgers then, and by the time we were done, we were nearly the only ones left in the restaurant.

We gave our waitress a big tip, in case she overheard our conversation and thought we were jealous or vindictive. Gotta maintain a solid reputation.

It’s time for tonight’s dinner. I have no idea what to eat. But after I eat, I’m going to start filling out some forms for grad school. That’s a big step for me — and hopefully a step in the right direction.

May 7, 2018

I've fallen in love with — maybe not “in love,” per se, but into a deeper level of liking — a guy from Kazakhstan. My phone autocorrects it to Kraftwerk, for some unfathomable reason. Every time I send a text about him, my friends have asked what I'm talking about.

“A guy from Kraftwerk?” Nora says. “Like, you have a crush on an old man in a band?”

“No,” I typed. “I'm talking about Kazakhstan. The country.”

“Where's he from?”

“I just told you.”

“No, goofy. I'm asking where he's from — is he from your college? From a class or a club? Or a restaurant? Or did you meet him online?”

I met him at an on-campus event. He's another grad student. He's twenty-seven, never been married, six feet tall, and very perceptive. I sent all of this back to her.

“Well, good luck to you. Have you been on a date yet?”

“No. I just have his phone number. And we text a bit, here and there.”

“Then call him.”

“What? And talk on the phone?”

“What else do you use a phone for?”

“Texting, reading emails, admiring my own posts on —”

“Whatever. I get it. You're not ready to actually talk to him.”

And I wasn't. I mean, I'm still not.

We talk through text, though, and when we run into each other on campus.

The other day, someone came over and interrupted us while we were talking.

“I've heard about what's happening in your country,” they said. “I'm sorry.”

After they walked far enough away, I turned to him. “What exactly is happening in your country?”

“Nothing,” he said. “That professor just says that to all of the international students who are Muslim.”

I gave him a look that (I hope) conveyed knowingness and all of that. He smiled, then. And then I smiled.

Right now, I'm doing research on his homeland. The first thing I researched was the food.

Delicious meats, from the looks of it. Good thing I'm not vegetarian. (Although I certainly respect vegetarians, I've never been able to walk that path.)

I wonder how he copes with missing home. I wonder if he's planning on staying here after school, or if he's eager to head back to his family and his friends.

Why am I sitting here wondering about someone else's future when I have plenty of open-ended questions about my own future?

I suppose it's easier to think about someone else, and about what they should do, than to think about your own circumstances.

Maybe I should put my pen down ... and just think about my own stuff for a little while. Not to write about other people — not today, anyhow — but to start living my own story.

September 20, 2017

We're visiting the mountains this week. We're staying in the forest, in a cabin that's been dropped in between two thick groves of trees.

All of the greenery made me remember a man who worked with my mom — a man who claimed he ate poison ivy as a kid so that he could become immune to it. I don't know whether it works or not; I'm too afraid to try it. Especially while I'm out alone in the woods.

I wouldn't recommend it, anyway. As someone who only eats salads that have a zesty dressing on them, I can't imagine eating raw-salad-on-the-vine.

There's something about experiencing nostalgia while sitting near a stream that runs through a massive forest. A forest that people have lived in for thousands of years.

I can't quit thinking about people. I can't quit thinking about all of our relatives back home, even though we're only a few hours away.

My grandmother had a stroke a few months ago. I bought her a fidget spinner, because I thought it would make her feel good to have something to occupy her hands. I don't know if it helps, but it gives her something to ... something else to focus on.

I have this feeling that the shot clock is always running, and that there are going to be People After, the same way there have been People Before. Sometimes it's an overwhelming thought. Other times, it's soothing.

Right now, I want to be soothed. I'm going to go wade in the stream, because I want to be around — within — a permanent thing.

June 17, 2016

The neighbor's rooster was at it again this morning.

I meant to wake up at 7:30 — that's sleeping in, for me. But the rooster's wake-up call came around 6:45, and he didn't stop until around 7:00, so I decided to get up early and get ready for brunch. I don't normally "do" brunch, but this was a special occasion.

Our graduating class decided to have a brunch meeting today, because our high school reunion is tomorrow night at Kilgore Country Club. They — the planning committee — wanted to have daytime and nighttime events, just in case some folks could only swing Friday morning or Saturday night. We haven't even been out of school for five years, but they're throwing a big one. (A big two, I guess — the brunch event drew a huge crowd.)

They'd planned on having an Olympics-themed celebration. Well, it's really more of a gold-themed affair. Gold medals, material success, flaunting wealth, etc.

Today's events, however, proved that money isn't the only way to attain happiness.

When I walked into the restaurant/watering hole, my friends were already tucking in. I walked over to them, pulled out a chair, and sat down. Before I could ask whether or not they were serving mimosas, I heard the newly-christened Mrs. Ashley-Fae McQuistion — she was a Fairbanks, back before 2015 — get into it with Cora Bailey.

I was friends — sort of, in a weekday-only, never-at-the-same-parties kind of way — with Nora Bailey. Nora is Cora's twin, but I didn't see Nora come rushing to her sister's defense. (As it turned out, Nora is in Hawaii.)

I didn't even try to hide my interest in their argument — I turned the chair around to face them. They were only two tables away, so I had a front-row seat.

Ashley-Fae scowled at Cora. "I'm not done with you yet. Remember when you fell down the stairs? That day, I —"

"What? What did you do? You didn't push me. I just fell."

"I told ..." Ashley-Fae started to giggle. "I said ..."

"I guess you told people that I'd tried to hurt my—"

"Nope. I told them you'd tried to get rid of your baby."

I'm pro-choice. I'm all about a woman's right to make her own choices. One of my choices is to not let someone get away with petty things, especially if they involve dishonesty, or public humiliation, or unnecessary gossip. And, in that very moment, my instant choice was to shove it all back in Ashley-Fae's face.

So I did. I never got in any (physical) fights in school, so I wasn't sure how this worked. But I rushed over to her table and I picked up the (plastic! not glass!) plate — and I smashed it over her head. Of course it still had food on it — all of the food and the sauce rained down onto her jacket and her lap.

She had something — hollandaise sauce? — in her eyes, so it might not have been the most fair fight. But she tried to smack at me (and missed) three times before they dragged her off to the restroom.

“Before you leave, why don't you tell us what's really good?” Cora shouted. She looked like she was going to cry, or to scream, or to ... laugh. And she did.

She started giggling and I joined in, too — although mine was more of a nervous laugh. I felt like I'd done too much.

I turned back to my table. Delia was smiling. George was smiling. Lots of folks were laughing. The whole room seemed more lively. It wasn't one of those "everyone applauded" scenarios; that isn't what I'm talking about. I just think that ... everyone kind of perked up at the prospect of a fight. Most of us hadn't seen an honest-to-goodness full-on fight since we'd graduated. People were giggling, whispering, or grinning in our direction. The only people who actually looked upset were the reunion organizers.

Of course, they told our group to leave. And so we did — at least seven of us, laughing at the mess I'd made.

I'll probably never be able to go back to that place — but it seems like a fair trade off.

September 21, 2018

My quasi-boyfriend and I went out to eat tonight. We went to the drive-in. They're open until October 15th this year — and since it feels like we're still in the middle of summer, we're taking advantage of the perfect weather. Everyone in town is — and I mean, everyone.

A drunk man wandered past our picnic table and collapsed near the back of the building. One of the stray dogs — there are several strays that hang around, waiting for people to drop ice cream or a burger — walked over to him and started licking his face.

The man started licking back.

I turned back to Ali, embarrassed by the man's behavior. "Don't you think ... does it ever bother you, the way people act around here?"

"What do you mean?"

"The way people are—"

"Publicly drunk? That happens everywhere."

"What I mean is," I said, pausing, gathering my thoughts. "You decided to come here. Thousands of miles from home. And you came here, out of all the places in the world. But I was born here. Well, thirty miles up the road, so—"

"I think if you really wanted to leave, you would've already done it." He smiled. "I think you will probably still leave, eventually. You could be happy somewhere else. But I think you will always want to come back."

"You certainly get some free entertainment here," I said, pointing to the man. He'd managed to stand up, but he fumbled with his keys. I was a bit worried that he'd try to get in one of the many trucks in the parking lot — his own or someone else's. Another man came over and intervened. He walked the man to one of the other picnic tables and sat with him, speaking calmly. I envied his sense of ... what to do when things were completely out of sorts.

"I feel like ..." Ali stopped, and then smiled. "You could come back thirty years later and you would still know this place. You would just know it. It is imprinted on you."

"Is it?"

He laughed. "It is. It's a part of you—the place and the people. You're the one facing the parking lot. I'm the one looking down at the river."

"Yes," I said. "But I really like looking at the people. And the land. Looking at the place itself."

"This is your home," he said. "It's what you know."

“Do you feel homesick tonight?” I asked. I felt sorry for not having asked about that until that moment.

He told me that he didn’t, but he said he’s starting to feel the pressure of finding something to do after graduate school. His brother is a basketball coach, and he’s worked with a couple of players on the national team. His brother asked if he wanted to get into running stats for the team, or helping in recruiting, doing translating work, or doing something similarly administrative.

“What would that involve?” I asked. “And don’t they hire, like, the best of the best to do that kind of work?”

“Are you saying that I’m not the best of the best?”

I laughed. “Sorry—that was supposed to be a compliment.”

He smiled. “Alexi told me that you really like basketball.”

I paused. “Who, me?”

I felt a little twinge. Not a sad twinge, but a ... twinge of wabi-sabi.

“You. Yes, he told me that you—”

“I’m a huge basketball fan,” I said. I wanted to tell him more, but I needed to buy some time.

“Let me finish this sandwich and ... let me finish this, and I promise I’ll tell you more.”

February 25, 2011

Basketball isn't as much fun as it used to be. I mean, I still enjoy going to games. I still enjoy being in and around the crowd. I still enjoy watching. I even enjoy watching NBA games — probably more than I enjoy watching college games.

And I like taking pictures for the school paper — though we certainly have better photographers. I still hesitate when it comes to getting down on the edge of the court, especially toward the end of a tight game. But they've asked me to help out, so I do.

It's just ... so different now.

I remember back when I played in middle school — phewww. It's almost painful to think about. I was heavier and slower than all of the other players, but I could aim and I could shoot. And I would always try my best.

I was never as good as Delia, when it came to scoring. She's good at driving to the basket, and she's good at weaving in between the players guarding her. She's very skilled on a technical level. But I've been very good at watching other people, following their moves, figuring out plays, and planning what the team should do next. Not just what one player should do — but how the whole team could work together to come up with better plays.

I would almost consider becoming a team manager, or something like that, but I ... I don't feel like anyone would take my opinions seriously.

It doesn't make me sad — what makes me aggravated is my lack of confidence in myself. In the meantime, I'm going to keep taking pictures and studying the game.

I already know how to play, but I want to learn even more rules. I want to learn the things I can't afford not to know — and I want to learn which rules can be broken.

August 28, 2011

Our house isn't exactly new — it's not on a historic register or anything like that, but it was probably built in the fifties.

The stuff in the house is pretty old, too. Two days ago, I got locked in. Not locked out — locked in. The knob made a noise halfway between a groan and a growl, like an old dog trapped in a shed.

I kept twisting the knob, but it wouldn't move. I was trapped. I ended up climbing out one of the back windows. When I went around and tried to unlock the door later, it worked.

The door only sticks from the inside — which makes me wonder if someone tried to trap a Victorian-era woman here. Like in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. I pictured her tugging on the doorknob with some guy standing on the other side, laughing, playing with a cigarette.

Anyway, I hauled out our old toolkit and I took the knob apart.

I removed the indoor knob, the outdoor knob, and then that long thing in the middle — I pulled them out of the door and set them to the side. I cleaned it with a mixture of olive oil and water, and put everything back together, and checked to see if it would work. It did.

I wonder if maybe I should go into a trade instead of going to a college. Maybe I could do both?

Speaking of practical people: this semester, I have class with Nora. She's friends with Delia. Sort of — they went to the same elementary school and they got to know each other back then.

She's very, very cool. She can fix stuff on cars and all sorts of mechanical-type stuff. She used to take dance classes and play basketball. (When I told her that I used to play, but had quit when I felt like I was bringing the rest of the team down, she told me that I had to do what was right for me. She seems like she gets me.) She has a twin sister. As a child, she lived in Spain for a year or two — military brat and all that. She's the stereotypical cool girl.

She's also nice, despite being so much cooler than the rest of us. She goes down the road to Nashville all the time — well, we all do, seeing as it's so close. But she goes to all these different concerts. Last month, she went to see a semi-local band that's apparently been making waves in Europe.

I told her that I didn't have much exposure to them, other than having heard one of their songs in passing. But, I said, I liked The Strokes and Phoenix and The White Stripes, so maybe I would be into their stuff.

"Mmmmm, you should listen to their newest album. Oh, and you should listen to *Because of The Times*," she said. "Ah, man. You really think The Strokes are gonna make another good album? Oooh. I bet you liked the last one."

“What’s bad about it?” I asked.

“Nothing — it’s just that the one before that was better.”

I didn’t want to argue with her — also, I couldn’t argue with her on that. While we were working on our group project, we talked about some other songs.

“I can’t think of a Phoenix song that I don’t like,” Nora said.

“That’s because you probably only know three Phoenix songs,” I said. I laughed, but I was a little nervous. I knew she was opinionated about music, but she seemed to take the jab in stride.

“Long Distance Call — that’s a good one,” she said.

“Too Young is my favorite,” I said. “United is a good album.”

“You like Phoenix?” Will said, butting in. “You’re the last person who I thought would like French things.”

I rolled my eyes. “I might not be so quick to forgive the French for all the land-grabbing in Morocco. And everywhere else, too. But I have to admit that they have good music. Because of the funk samples, mostly. But the music is good.”

“Phoenix, Daft Punk, Air,” Will said.

“All of those are just so good,” Nora said. “Have you seen *Lost In Translation*?”

I let Will and Nora talk about the movie while I got back to drawing up plans for our project. I’m not sure what we’ll end up doing — but I’m glad that I’ll get some good music recommendations along the way. And that I’ll have some ~~cool~~ good people to be around.

July 18, 2018

My cousin came to visit after my grandmother died. My grandmother wasn't her grandmother — we just have the same great-grandmother. Even so, she knew that it would help to have family nearby.

We sat on the front porch. I didn't know what to say. It felt like my heart and my mind — not that they'd been emptied, but that something important had been drained out of me.

Everything else was there. Everything else was working. But the thing that was missing tugged at me and made it where I couldn't speak.

"Look. A cardinal. Over there on the fence. Your grandmother was a lot like a cardinal," she said. "She was beautiful. She stood out wherever she went."

"Yes. I'm a lot like a hummingbird," I said. "I'm beginning to realize I can't stick with one thing for very long."

I hesitated before adding, "You're probably a hummingbird, too."

She laughed. "Girl, I don't know what we are, but we're both strange birds."

I smiled. I'm glad that I still have someone to be strange with.

Appendix: Text Messages

GEORGE. The remote-controlled vacuum is stuck under the table. It kept turning in circles under the chairs, and then when I moved all the chairs out, it got trapped under one of them.

ME. It's hiding from you, Gee.

GEORGE. No, no — it's not hiding. I actually feel sorry for it. Him? Her? She's just spinning around and around now.

ME. Then turn her off and get an old-fashioned vacuum.

GEORGE. Can't do it. I don't look good in a little maid outfit. And why would I turn her off? That'd be like killing a friend.

ME. She's more like a pet than a friend.

GEORGE. Pets are like friends.

ME. And some friends are like pets.

GEORGE. ... girl, no. That's sounding a little kinky.

DELIA. My mom is upset because her phone autocorrects GOD to GID. Ajdhipodiieis.

ME. But who is Gid? Short for Gideon?

DELIA. I told her it was okay. I said I still understood what she was talking about, whether she typed GOD or GID.

ME. ... oh my Gid.

ME. Sometimes, I feel like I could put the groceries away before I even get the trunk unloaded.

DELIA. What does that mean?

ME. I'm always getting ahead of myself. Trying to do B before A.

DELIA. That's nothing. I've seen you try to do Z before A.

ME. Damn. You know what? I'll talk to you later. I've gotta go do DIY, DTF, XYZ, and double A.

DELIA. 😞

ME. My muffin top was probably hanging out last night. Legally changing my last name to Muffin-Topp.

DELIA. I'll join you. We can start a new family. The Muffin-Topps and the Chubb-Rubbs.

GEORGE. Working on a country song called “Hard-Ankled Mama.”

GEORGE. And another one that I've tentatively titled “Take a Lyft to Dollywood.”

ME. You are a genius.

ME. When you make it big in Nashville and get your own reality show on CMT, please let me be one of your assistants-slash-friends.

ME. I want it for you - but I also want it for me. 😞

ME. Sweatpantscore?

GEORGE. Cluttercore. Trollopcore. OnlyeatingSubwaysandwichescore.

ME. Run it through the garden, babe.

DELIA. I kept saying — in my dream last night — “A bug named James, report to the front desk. If you’re a bug named James, report to the front desk.”

ME. LMAOOOOO. How many bugs showed up?

DELIA. Seven.

CORA. Girl. It's the day before Halloween and the neighbors already have their Christmas lights up.

ME. This is the same neighbor who traps raccoons and drops them off behind the YMCA?

CORA. The one and the same.

ME. I was making a list of things that evoke memories of a working class childhood. Here's what I've got so far: chicken Vienna sausages, Clear American water, and Faded Glory clothes.

GEORGE. Marlboro Reds. Dr. Thunder. How could you forget Dr. Thunder? DR. THUNDER?!

GEORGE. And you call yourself a woman of the people.

DELIA. I caught my little cousin smoking before Thanksgiving dinner. She said, "I'm sorry you had to find out I smoke this way."

DELIA. Yeah — by coming around the corner and catching her covering the smell with Febreze? I said, "Aren't you going to apologize for spraying me in the face?!?!!!"

DELIA. No. "It's probably better for your lungs than the smoke is for mine, so no need for an apology."

ME. ... but how many did you get off of her?

DELIA. Be serious.

ME. Cora and I ran into each other at the store today. We were talking about calc class memories. Math is (still) tough.

GEORGE. A Hell's Angel helped me with my math homework.

ME. Today?

GEORGE. No — why would I have math homework today? I'm 23 and not in school. Back when I was in fourth grade.

ME. I didn't think they were so ... accepting and willing to do free tutoring.

GEORGE. He was my sister's boyfriend.

ME. Ooooooh.

GEORGE. If only they'd gotten married — then he could've helped us with our calc homework.

ME. I just saw a buggy going through the drive-thru at The Party Barn.

DELIA. An Amish buggy? No way.

DELIA. Well, I mean, I believe you. My dad tried to take his dump truck through there once. Wouldn't fit.

DELIA. I tried to take my own dump truck through there, IYKWIM. Also wouldn't fit.

ME. Delia. Please.

ME. My cousin Cece - she's a distant cousin, a distant cousin, I know - she's the one who wrote that book. The one that's making people mad.

GEORGE. I know.

ME. Well, I talked about it with Delia earlier today. I ran into her at Walmart and she said, "Did you read that interview they did with Cece Murphy? Isn't that your Cece?"

ME. And I said, "Yeah." And she asked me if I read it. Well, I did.

GEORGE. And?

ME. Did you read it, too?

GEORGE. I did.

ME. This is the part that seems to be making people mad. (I'm pasting it in. Wait just a sec.)

ME. "Some people in our neck of the woods want to go on and d-i-e. Can I say that? Without it sounding like a threat? Anyway, they're cool with dying because Jesus did it, and it's one of the only things they can do that Jesus also did."

ME. And then the interviewer said, "But what about being compassionate? Jesus did that, right? Surely they can do that, too." And she said, "They would rather die than be compassionate."

GEORGE. LMAOOOOO.

GEORGE. Do you think she's wrong, though?

ME. I ...

ME. You and Delia think it's funny. I think Cece thinks it's funny - but she's also being serious. I guess I think she has a point. A point-ish. But I think she's making lots of people angry. I don't think she should play at being Socrates.

GEORGE. Why do you think that? I think she has a point. I'm going to read her book.

GEORGE. It's not even 200 pages long.

ME. It's a short book.

ME. It's a good book, too. Being a short book is what makes it so good.

ME. Sometimes, when I go to tell someone how old I am, I'm like, "Oh, 20. No, 23. No, 25."

ME. Why do I feel like the number doesn't match my reality?

GEORGE. Because you're immature as hell.

GEORGE. Nah, I really think it's because we still feel young. Because we are still young. It's as simple as that.

Appendix: Blog Posts

August 7th

I didn't remember that much about tonight's drive home — other than that it was sunny. And the skies were clear. And I was fortuitously in the left lane when I whizzed by a massive bale of hay that someone dropped in the highway. All in all, it was a good evening.

That hay bale made me think about something that happened last week. I was headed down the street in front of Food Giant. It's always busy over there. About halfway down the block, a basketball bounced into the road. I slammed my breaks and stopped a few feet away from it. I thought the ball was going to roll clean across the road into the grass on the other side of the street. It didn't — it bounced off the curb and rolled back into the middle of the street.

I flashed my headlights and motioned to the man whose driveway it rolled away from — I wanted him to know that he could come get it. He grabbed it and I made sure he was out of the road, waved in a "you're good" way, and then headed back home.

I would've felt terrible if I'd run over the ball — it was a Spalding Street Ball. My cousin Rillie helps run a 3x3 team and ... I know how much time and effort some of these 3x3 players are putting in. I didn't want to run over a twenty-dollar basketball — twenty dollars is a lot of money around here. A lot of people here are going to have chicken instead of turkey for Thanksgiving and the other holidays — maybe that's because we have a chicken plant in our town, but I don't think that's the only reason.

Poultry isn't hard to come by, but money sure is.

September 2nd

I had to take my car to the mechanic yesterday. In the waiting area, I put my earbuds in and watched some Vines. I knew it might be awhile before the guy would be able to tell me how much the repairs would cost, so I settled in with my little videos. In the era(s) before Vine, I probably would've been, like, reading Quizilla stories. And then reading tweets. And then reading BuzzFeed articles. If you'd told me two years ago that I would be addicted to watching six-second videos, I wouldn't dispute it, but I would've been surprised at how much cinematic material you can pack into six seconds.

The mechanic popped around the corner. "Hold on just another minute, miss. I've gotta go check one more thing," he said. He'd been out in the garage for ten minutes. I'm not sure if he'll be getting my car soon or ... if I'm going to be paying a hefty bill.

While I was wondering about all that, a man walked in. I recognized him immediately. He was my friend's boyfriend's dad. "Mr. Smith?"

He suddenly remembered me. “You and Delia are JoJo's and David's friends. How are you?”

I asked quickly how he and all of the kids were — and then I followed up with my own news. “I'm sure he's doing better than me. I hit a deer the other night. Just some surface damage on the hood, but I'll probably have to pay to get the whole front repainted.”

“Don't worry about it — every other person around here has hit a deer before. I mean, it's something like 50 percent of all drivers in the state that have hit or will hit a deer. There are just too many wandering around.”

I thanked him for trying to make me feel better.

“How many points?”

“She was a doe,” I said.

“Ah — it's a damn shame you didn't get a buck.”

“No,” I said. “No. I can't bear the thought of antlers going through the windshield.”

“But if you hit a buck, you could've kept the antlers. Hit a twelve-pointer, get 'em mounted, and tell everyone —“

“Lie to everyone?” I asked. But I smiled.

“No! Some people hunt with guns — you just went hunting with your car, that's all.”

I laughed.

He apologized to me, and then said that he would take care of a few of them this hunting season, and next season, and the season after that.

"Speaking of seasons," I said. "Is David going to be coaching at the middle school?"

He was obviously proud, so I let him brag a little bit. Then he mentioned the high school team. And the year they went to the state semi-finals, where they lost spectacularly.

I admitted that I didn't like seeing the coach and the parents gang up on the kids. I told him I remembered when the boys' team went to the state tournament, and how one of the player's dads yelled at *all* the players on the team. He wasn't even a coach.

“Ya didn't want it bad enough,” he had screamed.

I felt sorry for them at the time — and I felt even more sorry as I got older. It wasn't fair, the expectations placed on some of those kids.

"He was trying to toughen them up, but ... it didn't work," I said. "It even got to the point where my friends Aaron and George quit playing.”

“But it did work for Aaron's brother. Jeremy is playing D1 ball. He'll probably try to make the NBA.”

"He might make it to the NBA - he's really, really good. He'll either make it there, or he'll be playing in Europe. Any team would be lucky to have him," I said. "And either way, he could go out and see the world."

“It's a shame Nashville doesn't have a team,” he said.

"Memphis has a team. And they're a pretty good team, sir."

“But Nashville is closer.”

“It is,” I said. “It's - it's right there.”

But the whole world is right there, and always has been - like a big backyard. The whole world is out there, and if we're lucky, we get to see a bigger piece of the landscaping. We get to see the parts of the land that don't belong to us, and we still have the chance to be welcomed. We can find a home anywhere, we can make friends anywhere - and we can get lost and find ourselves all over again.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!